

# In Petersburg in Black and White

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Poems of Russia

2011 - 2014

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Bruce Turner

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Just Arrived,

in a city once renowned for spying,

during the weekend we spent hours  
wandering the st. petersburg streets  
and ventured deep into the beating

heart of russia's former imperial  
lairs seeking to uncover some of  
its secrets in the late october air-

and wherever we walked we were  
pleased that no one stopped to turn  
or stare or appeared at all to care

in what direction our footsteps were  
dropping or what with our gesture  
we might be intending, with no one

contending there was anything at all  
odd or postured, and we for our parts  
never pretending that we were seeing

any places on a dare or were vying

to tease the fabled paranoid bear.

## Comrade

At a diplomatic reception we talked  
with a retired soviet general and his  
wife; though he was hard of hearing

and I could not always comprehend  
his russian, he pointed with pride to  
all the medals draped across his chest

and explained that after the suffocation  
of the Warsaw uprising by the Germans  
he had advanced all the way to Berlin

with the victorious Red Army, and while  
he chastised me for being an American,  
he spoke with pride of the times when

our two countries were allied in siding  
against an evil of such magnitude that  
cooperation overrode other differences...

We left it at that, but hardly a week had  
passed when I received out of nowhere  
a modest plastic album featuring photos

of the two of us and our wives together  
as well as postcards with views of the  
well-known landmarks of St. Petersburg,

a touching reminder that, in the end,  
our hearts will prevail over reason's  
diseases and as we grow more aged

we can hear the voices of the sages.

## Time Travel

In the train from St. Petersburg to Moscow  
and back we peered out from parallel tracks  
across the plains to the east and west and

over the pines and birch trees stretching  
as far as our eyesight's flight toward  
the late morning's still igniting horizon.

Who knows who over the years followed  
this same road: revolutionaries carrying  
a goad southward from Russia's empire

to its future Bolshevik capital; or simple  
soldiers sent north bent on breaking the  
three-year siege of starving Leningrad

as they straggled across muddy marshes  
or plodded through capacious snow drifts  
against the load of continental seasons.

One senses today, for tourists and business  
people ensconced comfortably in carriages  
of high-velocity projectiles dashing to close

distances, that Russia will have journeyed  
far toward its destination if it can embrace  
this new dose of invasion, chase a path

to erase at last all trace of past devastation.

## Lasting

Behind the Church of Spilled Blood  
as we passed the bridge that crosses  
over the restless channel waters

we spotted a collection of padlocks  
attached to the railings and supporting  
structures, painted or engraved on

their faces in Russian the names of  
pairings, placed there no doubt as  
testaments to the power of vows

to withstand the ebbs and flows of  
the tides as well as the crushing ice  
that besieges the city in the winter.

---

I do not know whether sometimes  
in the middle of the night a thief  
steals onto the site and attempts

to pry one open, wheither they are  
made of stuff strong enough to survive  
the changing seasons or if corrosion

has imprisoned them shut so nothing  
is able to separate what desire once  
welded together, or whether it is not

a criminal at all but a spouse who  
intends to slink there in the dark to try  
to undo what he hastened to fasten

in place in shared embrace for ever.

---

We continue walking arm in arm  
and turn our eyes from speculation  
to the distance, grasp with fingers

still intertwined and lives interlaced  
and tightly woven together our own  
present fortune in the revelation that

our clasp thus far has held so well

and without any telling separation.

## Aurora

In the late morning as the first  
glimmering beams of light angle  
low across the blackened waters

into the darkness of northern night  
they set aglow the gilded domes  
of churches and high needled spire

of the fabled Peter and Paul fortress  
before extending slowly earthward  
to gleam anew from the rectangular

mirrors of rows of windows facing  
teemed the Neva River, spaced above  
them low-blowing shreds of cloud

whose flight frames a stage that has  
barely changed over the centuries  
despite the tow of human passions.

The Aurora's guns are silenced now  
at its berth in the channel, its gray  
hulk no longer commanding under  
the stream of daylight's expansion.

## Winter Morning

Resembling blackened smoke  
but torn and elongated rather  
than plumed and high rising

the clouds in the late morning  
move quickly across the skyline,  
their grayness here and there

penetrated by the domes of  
St. Petersburg's cathedrals or  
by the spires of the Peter and

Paul fortress or the Admiralty  
against which in profile one  
can discern the massive hulks

of seagoing vessels moored  
and motionless in the channels  
awaiting some future voyage.

Strobes probe into the shadows  
from the exteriors of buildings  
and against the dim light trees

in atavism stretch their leafless  
branches in multi-limbed and  
—fingered thirsting after the last

summer's burst of sunshine, while  
people clothed against the cold  
scurry soundlessly to their jobs

shrouded in ground's darkness.

From a distance gilded graceful  
onion-domed sanctuaries stand  
sentinel and seemingly beckon,

reflect and rebound morning's  
gleam as a promise of rebirth that  
the mind alone can never reckon

and only the heart can rehearse.

## Snow Maiden

Tucked away seeking clemency from  
the elements close to the metro station

at a less exposed corner of a building,  
barely able to hold herself upright while

hunched over a cane even from a distance  
visibly shaking, the crooked woman poses

as best she can with her tin cup extended,  
hoping for a coin now and then to clink

for a shiny moment in her modest pail.

While many passers-by barely lend a blink  
there was soon one young woman, dressed

fashionably in her furry boots and hood  
who stood to join the lady's tale, and

with a wink not only handed her enough  
for her to buy some food for a day or two

but also acknowledged her existence  
and for a moment made a difference

as she sinks beneath the Arctic gale...

## Legacy

Little by little, as the old warriors-  
weighted down under their rows  
of medals but proud to show them

and to swear allegiance in standing  
as upright as possible- start to die  
off and the number of survivors

ready and healthy enough to join  
in reunion steadily declines, so too  
the stories of their exploits in their

heydeys come to resemble fruits  
suspended after the growing season  
that begin to wither on the vine,

hoping for a vintner yet to extract

their nectar and -before it's too late-

render it into wine.

Jan 27 Lifting of Leningrad Siege

## Hothouse

Outside in the frigid winter night  
bounded by snow and hounded by  
icicles pointed down like daggers

commuters straggle along bundled  
up against the cold, try to protect  
extremities against the frost's bite

wrapped in layers of wool and fur  
that leave only a narrow tunnel un-  
blocked as a passage to the inside.

All the more reason, once arrived  
at a destination, within its heated  
rooms to wear coverings translucent

and light under perfumed exposure:  
here exotic creatures can be sighted  
as the ballerinas with arching backs

extend their fingers like ivy vines  
toward an artificial sunshine while  
orchestras recreate the rush of bees

and motion of birds and butterflies  
taking flight in the hot steamy air,  
as surfaces flush and glances probe

where they might alight and dare.

The russians long ago devised an  
antidote to the freezing darkness  
in the creative arts that flower in

man-made theaters, understanding  
that interminable nights make all  
the more required a special effort

to take a stand against the seasons.

## Then and Now

Especially in the evenings  
when the car drives along  
one of the embankments

one sees juxtaposed one  
against the other in parallel  
first the gilded spire of the

island Peter and Paul fortress  
topped by its famous angel  
that gleams steady and softly

as it gathers and reflects  
the last limpid beams of light  
rising toward the heavens,

followed by the sparkling  
sight of a television tower  
in blue and red and white

that alone flashes brightly  
behind in the distance in  
generating its own waves

sent to penetrate the night  
and illuminate a path on  
screens across the darkness.

Here the past and the present  
come together and clash  
for a moment and you can't

help but ponder which one  
of the two in two centuries  
yonder will have the power

in the end to outlast  
and surpass the other.

## March

When the days grow longer  
and the temperature rises  
the glaciers start thawing

as spring begins gnawing  
loose winter's frigid hold.

Droplets of water, so cold

but livening, pour off the  
roofs into the mouths of  
gutters and dive downward

by spout onto sidewalks  
where they collect in pools  
until they drown the dirty

grassed ground around them.

But so long as spring has not  
arrived for good they never

dry but repeatedly freeze and  
melt, then return again to ice  
while biding summer breezes.

So it is too with the rush of  
release after the crush of long  
enforced patience. people prod

their leaders to seize the season,  
give a nod to hastening lasting

elemental rights and freedoms.

## Madonna

Today on the train I sat opposite  
a young mother voyaging alone  
with her infant daughter. While

my own are grown, I admired the  
dainty child even when at times she  
complained, but mostly I listened

to her maternal dove, constantly  
cooing to her offspring, wooing her  
with a steady stream of mellifluous

Russian syllables dreamily imbued  
with soothing reassurances that  
so readily reminded me of when

my own children were small and  
my wife's cadences from France  
held them entranced and enthralled,

lulled them into tranquility while  
they slumbered, cried or gurgled.

There is nothing that can truly vie  
with a mother's iconic devotion,

nothing like her warbling tongue

to tie her babe to Mother Russia(n).

## Lake Ladoga

How odd, as winter's snow and  
fog appears at last to have receded  
and spring has arrived for good

and visitors have begun to roam  
the city's streets in anticipation of  
the never-ending nights of summer,

that for a week or so sheets of ice  
in thousands of dissolving islands  
wend down the river neva under

the bridges and between the walls  
under the admiring eyes of denizens  
as they make their way to the ocean

and temporarily cool the environs,  
a yearly reminder of the frozen lake  
over whose surface was once thrown

the lifeline that saved then-Leningrad  
from the death grip of the besieging  
German army during the darkest days

of the war's most merciless blizzard.

Winter has always proved for Russia  
to be a friend against invasion even as  
in the warming sunshine its citizens

without asking safely strip then bend  
aright and bask their still pale bodies  
in the sun against reflective surfaces

as they try to take the fullest advantage  
of the short-bloomed season, grateful

to be outside and to have survived  
and with every reason.

## Chef d'oeuvre

Like the Paris Eiffel Tower  
the Bolsheokhtenskiy Bridge  
over the main Neva River

derives its power of impression  
not from a unified, monolithic  
and streamlined structure but

rather a complicated interaction  
of iron beams and skin connected  
the one to the other, fastened

together with millions of plugs  
made of the identical metal  
and painted over to protect the

living machine from rusting.

Ultimately both creations draw  
their enduring seductive force  
and reason from their proximity

to nature, where the balance  
of skeletal supports and joints  
connected by tendon or muscle,

or the trunks and stems of  
vegetation and trees that rely  
on arteries and capillaries of

branches culminating in leaves  
to absorb the sunlight and add  
inside a growing ring to mark

the completion of a season.

We trust them and love them  
because they are somehow of  
a piece with us, their inner secrets

visible yet taken in their totality  
still magic and incomprehensible,  
like the golden clench rumored

to be been placed incognito  
somewhere among the edifice's  
braces, the never discovered key

to a triumph spanning the trenches  
and true beauty's eternal mystery.

## Girls in Summer

Notwithstanding their northern location  
clothed white in winter under layers of  
drifting snow and shadow of darkness

Russia's famous birch trees flourish on  
the edges of forest, their peaks reaching  
upward to the heights as in their droves

they appear to have huddled together  
for warmth with their thin-barked slender  
trunks heeling ground like stilettos; and

so it is too with the young women here  
who despite the air's coolness only lightly  
cover in stockings long legs' exposure

to the elements, or, when summer arrives,  
under skirted canopies lay bare their skin  
to gleam in the sunshine, pleased at last

to free beauty and brightness to light up  
and reflect the glories of the season, and  
perhaps as a reason for sight to approach

and seek to be permitted close to explore  
among the rustling leaves in abandon

and adore limbs extended in tandems.

## Post-Soviet

In such a multitude of cases  
of Peter's architectural spaces  
of pulchritude there wait so

many chiseled socialist faces  
whose familiar traits are blemished  
and visibly disintegrating now

in places, especially in the friezes  
and bas-reliefs molded to reach out  
to the revolutionary masses from

the walls of Soviet constructions.

At the same time they still endure  
as traces in an older generation's  
remniscence, though their features

are blurring with the diminishing  
powers of mind that cohabit with  
them, as seniors strain to maintain

their dignity despite the changing  
of generations, as the latest seeks  
to erase prior markers in excess

so as not to envisage

its own bleak fall and destruction.

## Orient Express

It's so much easier to build and  
operate a special bullet train  
to travel from point 'a' to 'b'

than it is to build a patchwork  
of connections to all points beyond  
and between, weaving a dense web

of economic ties in which growth  
assumes the aura of inexorability.

A track is only a single sinew and  
it requires an extensive network  
of rails to co-mingle the capillaries

of a gigantic nation, to distribute  
the breath of expanding lungs  
to a continent's farthest stations

while carrying their nutrients back  
to the center to replenish its stomach  
and enrich its heart and intelligence.

What blessed America the beautiful  
was a body naturally so well-endowed  
but in humors also well-proportioned;

while Russia's expanses too are fertile,  
too many still remain unplowed, their  
treasures waiting to be uncovered and

be given wheels and set in motion.

## Eve in Eden

At the parikmakherskaya  
(literally the wig maker's),

in a universe replete with hair  
her salon includes two rabbits  
locked on the floor in their lair

as well as a pair of parakeets  
periodically permitted to elude  
their cage in flaps through the air.

While my coiffeuse at first glance  
appears rather funky and punkish  
in a strawberry-tinctured tonsure,

trouser drawn snugly across her  
derriere and shirt stretched ever  
so tightly across cupped brassiere,

her voice may sound rather tiny and  
her manner exudes shyness, but when  
she takes her scissors into her hands

one cannot help but notice how  
delicate are her phalanges as they  
flits through hirsute thicket like

a dexterous canary arrayed in  
its flash of plumage and chirping  
merrily as it dips and weaves

and bobs and turns to shape and  
trim disheveled mops to perfection,

so entirely at home in her art

and the menagerie she maintains  
with abidingly unfeigned affection.

## Lorelei

It is to me always amazing how  
completely unfazed our russian  
interpreters manage to remain and

the total absence of any state of  
nervousness they display despite  
the high pressure of performing:

there's no quickness of shallow  
breath, no flutter of blinks or blush  
of flesh as they turn their placid

and translucent eyes toward you,  
then part waiting lips and think  
their translation, and when at last

she begins to speak a steady voice  
sounds without so much as a tremor  
of vibrato, the timbre of its syllables

crystalline as they flow over ears  
with the freshness of a babbling  
brook as clear as melting winter

that sings so sweetly from spring  
until autumn and gives unto others

the chance to see precisely into

its multi-colored pebble bottom.

## In Spirit

At the gates to the tranquil domain  
with venerable Orthodox structures  
where the Metropolitan holds office

during the day and at night prays,  
there lies a park, open to the public,  
scattered with black-soiled paths

and the planks of wooden benches  
under a canopy of dark-barked and  
slender trees stretching ever higher,

where here and there couples huddle  
in quiet conversation and others pass  
on their way to unknown destinations.

The walkways here are littered with the  
plastic remains of nocturnal drinking  
and inebriation that fill up and spill

over from the wire-mesh trash cans,  
like the pools formed in places within  
the grounds where the soil is sinking.

A disheveled, dirty and stinking man,  
with face disfigured and body reeking,  
staggers by, seeking the metro station.

Inside the monastery, priests may be  
sleeping, the Metropolitan speaking  
to his God in the hope of leading his

flock to harbor and to safe keeping,  
bowed to rescue in spirit what flesh  
has left to alcoholic self-destruction,

aiming to preserve eternal life  
for lives wasted in consumption.

## Picture Perfect

The tourists in the city's famous museums  
arrive in throngs to visit where fabulous  
galleries belong and renowned collections

carefully accumulated for the day's display  
over the centuries contain some of human-  
kind's most celebrated names in paintings.

One might expect they would dedicate more  
of their time with eyes on the masterpieces  
to spy and be swept by the dabs of pigment

and oils into what roils in the depths and  
in the tangled interplay of drips of texture  
behind the lips of exquisite portraiture.

But many arrive only with the intention of  
capturing as many images as they can on  
their computerized cameras, have in mind

to store them in private perpetuity or place  
them in concatenations of slides to show  
them to friends and family, as if knowing

they were inside without ever residing and  
glanced at a surface but without inquiring

could ever establish a real connection

with the struggle of art with imperfection.

## Looking Glass

In the throne room of Catherine's  
regal summer palace stretch from  
floor to domed ceiling its baroque

arrangements of mirrors decorated  
with french flourishes that alternate  
with same-shaped windows in order

to maximize the penetration of, and  
diffuse by reflection, in-streaming  
of light to create beaming opulence

where once royalty crossed during  
masquerade waltzes. as an orchestra  
plays and a voice echoes, one's sight

of eye hesitates and, like a bird's,  
constantly oscillates between looking  
out toward the receding horizon and

diving steadily narrowing images  
deep to the bottom of a journey  
of dreamy parallel introspection.

it seems like that when often I face  
you and cannot determine whether  
to gaze left or right when embracing,

as if only in the undulations of mind  
that accede to self-cancellation

can humankind find harmony

in divinely resplendent places.

## Consanguinous

The princess and the Jewess who  
is anything but a Jewish princess,  
the blue-blooded one the grand-

daughter of a noblewoman who  
fled to france when the bolsheviks  
flooded, advanced in the civil war

that bled the red and white factions  
of socialist revolution and opposing  
conservative reaction; the other one

whose mother left for America under  
the pressure of anti-Semitism, before  
collectivism collided with economy

and Communism committed suicide.

And yet the one returned this year  
to stay and marry a Russian banker  
in a prodigal act of reintegration,

while the other was only visiting,  
come to tweet and bring to its feet  
an audience in eruptions of ovation,

each woman hankering irresistibly  
for her linguistic and even atavistic  
origins irrespective of the reigning

political conditions, seeking to heal  
her exile's hemorrhage at long last,  
use new freedom to find a measure

of reconciliation and fulfill personal  
ambitions, whatever the displeasure  
and complaints each may entertain

about a tainted past  
and its less benevolent traditions.

## White on Night

It is neither a myth nor a fiction  
that living in “Piter” is an exercise  
in reconciling perpetual contrasts

and contradictions, an existential  
condition made perhaps inevitable  
by an emperor’s relentless ambition

to campaign forth to the polar circle  
and select a capital far to the north,  
by erecting it in the marshes astride

a varied collection of islands criss-  
crossed by wide river and bounded  
on one side by the gulf of an ocean

and on the other by the roundest  
freshwater surface on the entire  
expanse of European continent,

a fancied oasis in the wilderness.

---

The weather also plays a role, here  
where during the year blinding ice  
disappears to eyes during the nights

of bleak winters, or sleek glass hides  
under the virgin flakes of the morn or  
piles up in jagged plaques in canals

along the path by icebreakers shorn;  
or shadows glow bright in the stark  
light of summer and the low clouds

that roll in trains from the ocean in  
crops made dark may flow into gray  
in blending black and white before

threatening below with snow or rain.

---

So it is with the city's denizens too,  
whose undying spirit and thirst for life  
extends to forgiving the pummeling

forces who left them numbingly bereft  
during the long fight for Leningrad, as  
courage and hope emerged victorious

over deprivation's vultures, yet whose  
hunger for greatness coincides at times  
with lack of discipline and ineptitude,

among whom planning too often relies  
on frantic improvisation to compensate  
for decrepitude and scanty calculation,

patriots and generous to a fault, if often  
authorities seem too tautly controlling  
and allow their paranoia to put a stop

to progressive motion, whose tradition  
of alcohol casts a pall on thriving and  
fashions the path of collective survival,

attached to films that almost always end  
in a tragedy, where ostentatious luxury  
must always coexist with lurking misery,

to be endured with a shrug and irony.

---

For a foreigner, it's impossible not  
to be affected by the multiple facets  
of the Russian mystery, and while

many are recorded in history, still  
I've become attached to my lists of  
oxymorons and paradox and all the

inconsistencies of behavior, eternally  
grateful for the favor of residing here,  
ever inclined to side with my adoptive

comrades despite our differences and  
their afflictions, knowing my departure  
will not cure my affection for Russia's

mix of juxtapositions and dichotomies,

less indelibly engraved in memory

than saved as an integral part of me.

Louisa Adams,  
Daughter of John Quincy Adams,  
1811-1812

If her distinguished father eventually  
returned to America after being sent  
as its minister to the Russian Empire

during the time of Napoleon's thrust to  
Moscow from which soldiers on both  
foes' sides died on the battlegrounds

before his folly was crushed, fate was  
no less sinister with the diplomat's sole  
daughter, extinguishing her flame while

she was just an infant and leaving but  
a tiny casket behind as a husk to rust,  
alone in an ocean of foreigners among

the burial mounds of St. Petersburg.

Yet proof she was not forgotten by her  
family then and those later begotten lies  
in the quest, realized two hundred years

after at their behest, to hew into a stone  
her appellation and lifespan counted away  
from home to pave in longevity a child's

passage despite its earthly brevity, if not  
to undo, then at least to lighten the sentient  
bones of the descendants of her progenitor

for whom her candle once burnt brightly  
with such allure and the signal promise  
a longer while to endure and accompany

her forebear on his path as history stirred.

## In Karelia

When traveling to Kizhi Island  
on Lake Onega one is compelled  
to be felled in spellbound wonder

by the all-wooden cathedral with  
its onion cupolas clad in aspen  
shingles that swell under rainfall

watertight to seal the icons inside  
without a single nail, a testament  
to northern soulfulness and industry

as well as liberty from serfdom.

---

Yet when Finnish Americans migrated  
near, urged to make emerge a Workers'  
Paradise, soon they became suspect

under the Soviet system, and not far  
from here in a clearing cut in forest  
Stalin's scourges executed thousands

in secret purges, prisoners of gulags  
whose blood forever will tincture the  
canal from the White Sea southward,

their bodies dumped without dirges.

---

History is too replete with ironies,  
its deeds wrapped in ebbs and flows

of paradox, in which songs of feats  
compete with losers' railing losses.

Bereft, we contemplate what's left  
in the rows of simple crosses, pray  
that time may heal while also fearing  
may cease the memory of past horrors  
when reformed in nostalgia's glosses.

## The Croquet Pitch

Whether the city of Kaliningrad  
or what once was Koenigsberg  
should truly be part of Russia

or returned to Prussia involves  
so much more than the addition  
of a letter for European history.

Where Kant wrote and smote  
others with his fashion sense  
some of the tensest fighting took

place in the Second World War  
with the Wehrmacht entrenched  
in brick fortresses and trying

to hold the tide against Stalin's  
organs about to pound Bach's  
polished counterpoint in rubble.

As an exclave, no longer German,  
yet also located so far away from  
the capital it's hard to be a slave

untroubling to Moscow, left alone  
like a picket, bounded by a thicket  
of enclosing unionized members,

it seeks to define its place before  
the last of its glorious past turns  
to ash in the dying embers while

played as a blinded ball by others,  
the pawn of a lawn game whose  
wickets it no longer masters and

whose thrall it cannot remember.

## Sundown

Evenings I try to take in the moment  
when from my window the long rays  
from a wintry late November sun's

descension light up in yellowed glow  
the rows of stucco chimneys that dot  
the skyline along the city's roof tops

starkly engraved against the remnants  
of blue-skied sightings, knowing that  
their blaze may age for only minutes

before the color begins to fade and die  
and, with a sigh, I turn away to make  
way for my immersion in nighttime.

## Lost

One may be safe in any weather  
ensconced in train and on the rails  
to Moscow from St. Petersburg -

from the window the birch trees  
dotting the plain are nearly black  
under a hurling storm in winter,

and it's not hard to conceive how  
trails become shorn by blizzard  
and obliterate any and all tracks

so that travelers and armies packed  
must fail to reach their destinations.

As I retracted my eyes and dozed  
I could discern the sniffles and sobs  
of my neighbor unfurling next to me

before they would drift away and  
return with his trips to the lavatory.

Human consternation too is a thicket  
ill disposed to others' penetration

since relationships can terminate  
without leaving any visible traces  
of visited or contemplated places

on our dried impermeable faces.

## black beauty

not that I would wish my transformation would be kafkaesque,

but there are moments when, if I were more like an insect, I might periodically shed my exoskeleton

to emerge from its shell nakedly new and unencumbered, and stop lying and lumbering to take flight

not so much as might a graceful butterfly floating among flowers or a moth fatally attracted to light

but more like a firefly with its own generating source of illumination within its tail with a strobe to probe

dark corners

we (otherwise) never see at night.

## Arctic Blast

Under a sliver of moon  
on a crystalline but  
fractured, frigid evening

you can see water vapor  
float like fog in droplets  
under the bridges above

the ice-broken cracks in  
the frozen surface of river,  
as exhaust fumes sputter

white from perpetually  
puttering automobile engines  
and exhalations rise in puffs

from hooded and hidden  
faces in layers wrapped to  
protect against the winter,

each breath visible and finite  
now as its moisture is caked  
into particles before it crackles

and blows in snowflakes

under the twilight.

## Angel Dust

(While you were gone)

I watched a part of a film  
in which a woman winged  
is grounded by a despot,

but because she is loved  
and believed in by another  
whose music steadily calls

to her in embracing vibrato,  
breaks away from her prison  
at last with grace and bravada

by lifting herself on currents  
up into the air and transporting  
her benevolent trumpeter there.

I don't believe in fairy tales  
and have experienced too well  
the inexorable pull of gravity,

but I also know the difference  
another heart makes in helping  
us bear our oppressive burdens,

allowing us at least to dream  
of taking flight in mind and  
let our sweeping eyes wind

ever higher until they

disappear in the stratosphere.

## Snowman

When the snowflakes descend  
we're all upended with awe of  
the hush of pristine whiteness,

then galled to see them thaw into  
mush, spaced into gullies soon  
sullied and turned into dark slush

before eventually they disappear  
under the crush of thousands of  
treads carrying their passengers

before they rush into a river or  
the ocean or simply evaporate.

So each one of us must return  
to dust, as our lushly shaped  
clay, fired in the forge of years

of work and play, can no longer  
spurn the array of years that crack  
its glaze however it was hardened

and degrade its gaze in traversing  
our faces in successive phases  
of disintegration and tired final

stages, before a lump is dumped  
into the ground or incinerated.

## Critical Mass

Deep under mud and grunge,  
there where those pulled from  
rusty dungeons or bludgeoned

with rubber truncheons were  
flung into pits with skeletons  
crushed and clacking, where

no longer they need dream  
of desperate lunges to freedom  
while trudging tied together

across the crunching tundra,

secure now in anonymous pits  
of collected heaps under mounds  
marked by season, if they remain

nameless, the lowness to which  
unreason plunged them cannot be  
expunged since, if people forgive,

history endures without forgetting,

even when the ground lets grass  
grow high and red poppies blossom  
under permissive skies in summer.

## Suomi

### Across the Border

Pine and birch tree branches  
frosted delicately in white stretch  
their fingers almost transparent

under the early morning's sunrise,  
as the glowing orb's yellow eye  
tries to penetrate the gauzy haze

over the Gulf of Finland  
and see clearly a way inland  
over pristine untracked valleys,

where

carpets of snow unblemished  
by traffic reflect the brightness  
without being overly dramatic,

unemphatically democratic,

as light paints the pitched roofs  
of yellow wooden farmhouses  
planted sparsely among the drifts

with beards of icicles hanging  
downward, and snow's surface  
glistens before our vision as it

listens to a language of letters  
by most found unpronounceable.

## Voyeur

As Peter conceived a monument  
of stone as a window *on* the west,  
to exploit without condoning it,

so too modern architects build

high tech structures all designed  
to let in luminosity but filter out  
the sun's heat-creating intensity,

like the pointillist pixel illusions  
of television and computer screens  
for watching as the world goes by

without ever touching it directly,  
plying us with seeming that we  
can somehow live its flat reality.

But it is not possible for people  
to remain sealed off hermetically  
within a controlled environment;

we need to step outside ourselves  
and be exposed to the elements,  
feel real warmth and cold on skin

and breathe in and smell the wind

as it blows from across the border.

## Lara

Even if you viewed the famous  
film of Dr. Zhivago, for the ones  
who never resided here it's hard

to intuit fully the seductiveness  
of Russian women in the dead  
of winter with its ruthlessness,

wrapped in fur coats or shearling  
to keep porcelain skin protected  
snugly under multitudes of layers

and feet and fingers clad in mittens  
and boots rather than fine slippers.

Indeed nothing quite compares

with discovering an immaculate  
face with penetrating eyes nestled  
safely within a hood with its halo

there to warm the air before it can  
flow onto face or through nostrils.

So it is with the Russian people  
that their charms often lie hidden:

you must penetrate the forbidding  
exterior before is revealed inside  
a warm smile that communicates

in longing, song and laughter.

## Spice of Life

At the authentic Lebanese restaurant  
where my daughter led me tonight,  
run by two men, one from the north

and the other from the south, also of  
different religious confessions who  
otherwise might have fled or bled the

other in their country or origin, where  
our raven-haired waitress said she was  
from Tajikistan and there had met and

wedded a man from her same land and  
planned in her spare time to complete  
a university degree in accounting, I felt

myself astounded and in wonderment  
at the range of diversity that leavens  
the bountiful soil and foundation of

the country, where the integration of  
innovation through assimilation never  
shuns new combinations and synergies,

lets difference give rise to stunning  
toils to carry us into future centuries.

## Eternal Return

As the weather starts warming and  
the ice melts and the snow recedes  
and begins to bleed into gutters in

drops that stream into the sewers,  
what's left is dirt, un-decomposed  
debris and plastic bottles, admixed

with grime and darkened soot and  
combined with charcoal sticks from  
trees shorn in the throes of winter.

Soon blades of grass will pierce anew  
through the canopy and cover the ugly  
ground in verdant thickening tonsure,

while pretty flowers bloom and lithe  
limbs rise high above the mud under  
the generous and indulgent sunshine.

Each time we hasten to reset the cycle  
in knowing that, without such trash, we  
cannot ever hope for this resurrection,

wait for the rain to cleanse its traces  
and for the next round cross our faces  
with the smudge of last year's ashes.

## Footloose not Free

It was not until my eyes perceived  
he possessed neither hands nor feet  
and ambulated on primitive padded

knees that my mind seized that his  
extremities must have been rent in an  
anti-personnel land mine blast, perhaps

as he bent over to pick up a shimmering  
object beside a road where Soviet tanks  
clanked along in the dust of Afghanistan.

Now as he hobbles among the metro  
cars without benefit of prostheses  
and weighed down with a bag hung

across his shoulder in accordance with  
the desperate thesis that a majority of  
passengers will feel touched enough,

either contrite or in fright, to toss a coin  
into its thick-skinned cavernous pocket.

No one speaks as he moves on paddles  
straddling the lines of countrymen until  
after the doors burst open and clumsily he

waddles away, before long lost to sight  
among the crowd running through the  
station to catch a train to what for him

will remain an unattainable destination.

## May Day

In the street next to the sidewalks  
near the exits of city metro stations  
the old widows without talk line

up to display for sale on threadbare  
towels their paltry, pathetic wares –  
a sprig of white lilies of the valley

or clump of dill or parsley pulled  
from a hidden garden, homemade  
jam, culled berries or canned fruit,

barely tempting based on price but  
  
for the women's imploring stares.

One senses it's more for them than  
making a smatter of supplemental  
income but rather also of scraping

together enough pieces of change  
for arranging subsistence survival;  
not about their retirement homes

but trying to keep just enough flesh  
on bones to continue existing and  
to hold at bay through the summer

and hope until the winter to delay  
  
the last station's inevitable arrival.

## Pas de deux

(or my Diana Vishneva)

The movements mesmerize when  
the seductive prima ballerina starts  
to twirl and accelerates in spin, her

diaphanous dress swirling as she  
curls splayed limbs to retract them  
back to her center, only to unfurl

them again and rock up onto pointed  
toes with arched fingertips above her  
head before abruptly hurling herself

forward untethered through the air,

finely to alight as a feather might  
on the burly and muscled shoulders  
of her bulgingly buttocked partner

as the pair embraces and their two  
bodies interlace in a surge of thirsty

surrender and merging together.

---

So I hope you can continue too  
to believe it was wisdom through  
these years to have relied on me

even if my physique was never  
so sturdy and deserving, but yet  
whose every sinew tried its best

to stretch itself through each and  
every musical test and whose heart

vied unswervingly to beat for you,  
welcomed the chance to take every  
dance beside you whether we laughed  
or cried in choreographing our fancies.

If I may not excel in performance to  
perfection, I'm grateful the fates had  
the grace to put me in the ideal place

to catch you that enchanted day  
when you flew in my direction.

For Vero on our 30<sup>th</sup>

## Wild Things

No doubt eons of stalking food  
and ice fishing in the harsh cold  
raised the profile of warm clothing,

so in winter all the women parade  
in stoles, shapkas and shubas made  
of furs stitched from extravagant

animal coats that now and again  
include even spotted ocelot skins.

More oddly, as summer blooms and  
flowers dot the ground the hallowed  
ritual begins anew in different hues,

as prowling young beauties amble by  
wrapped in trousers dyed in a leopard  
prints, and mottled patterns abound

on garments ranging from skirts to  
blouses to scarves and head bands,  
or platform shoes and giraffe-neck

spikes that unthrottle the illusion  
of a foray into Africa on safari:

Authentic truths in June turn to  
fiction as flesh emerges and

instincts splurge after so many  
months of hidebound constriction.

## Northern Summer

Winging south from Murmansk  
past Lake Ladoga to the mouth  
of the river Neva, from my row

the vista at dusk shows

glass surfaces glowing in scarlet  
against the dark blue tree-scape  
and stripes of rose-hued sunset

as points of blinding brightness  
that trap and reflect the intensity  
but also the ephemeral fragility

of white-nighted solstice

before they begin to darken early  
and be transformed slowly to ice,  
eventually to disappear from sight

under winter's onset.

The Dunes  
Near Sestroretsk

Not far beyond the town where  
once stood a Swedish fortress  
along a river still called Sister,

it's so peaceful here and serene  
by the sea where the air is clear  
and the beaches are swept clean

and gnarled pines and scrub rise  
from the sandy soil and bathers  
recline or exercise on the seashore

where now access awaits all who  
desire it within steps of the spas  
where pedantic officials retired

to find healing and palliatives  
for idiosyncratic maladies that  
had numbed them. What awe

there was then has succumbed  
to a thaw in spirit democratic,

and only the wind need whisper

when young lovers walk hand in  
hand feeling free to be romantic.

## Barely August

During fleeting weeks of summer  
in the stifling heat of white nights  
that interfere with pressing eyes

into slumber, the Petersburgers  
indulge their whimsy in an effort  
to feel far less encumbered, dress

in clothing light and revealingly  
flimsy as a means of exploiting  
to full advantage the ephemeral

season, at times even yielding to  
the temptation to flaunt their lines  
beyond reason, and yet precisely

in their insouciance they display  
their sublime awareness of every  
lifetime's ultimate brevity, show

themselves determined to revel their  
best in levity before darkness arrives,

surrender themselves to exuberance  
before winter tests their endurance.

## Waterfront

Her voice sounded so strong on  
the phone despite the distance it  
defied belief that during her dip

in the river her path had wended  
so wrongly, left her listing and  
crippled with one leg and hand

now limp, unable to clasp objects  
without tremor or propulse her  
without an assisting contraption.

So it is as we grow ancient that  
each of our horizons undergoes  
an implacable if often invisible

contraction, to leave others spent  
and miserable, feeling stupefied at  
the abruptness of the end's arrival

even if they may know deep down  
that on a particular day fate will  
be intractable, reeling from loss,

rudderless in the face of finality,  
as we try pell-mell to provide and  
receive consolation, vie to extend

comfort to the surviving while we  
search the pools of others' glances

for a glimmer of signification.

## A Day in Fall

The leaves were so golden,  
like a starburst explosion,  
that their collection of light

blinded the eye in an Indian  
summer, and while on our way  
we would stop on occasion

to bask in their magnificence  
before they flutter to ground,  
turn brown and insignificant.

As we grow older and I glance  
over my shoulders I hope that  
I too may still experience bold

inspiration before the death that  
awaits us can capture me: better  
to burn up when re-entering the

atmosphere than hurtle onward  
coldly through space's vacuum  
so as not to face it another year.

(In Vyborg)

Old Man

Winter

A cold wind  
blows snow

where black ice  
and shadows flow

into the darkness.

We know the end  
of the year nears

but not what  
spring will bring:

it being unclear  
if frigid surface

will thaw and  
slicken the morrow

or wait, obdurate,  
with frozen cracks

of indeterminate

traumatic sorrow.

## Spurned

Last night we were awakened  
by the remonstrating of a man  
suspended from a gutter outside

an apartment's window as he  
tried to use his physical prowess  
to break his way into its interior

and retake his recalcitrant lover.

Repeatedly he called out her  
name, first pathetically, and then  
with growing anger, to attempt

to persuade her, in vain, to open  
up if only for a solitary moment,  
cracking a pane in the process.

But unable to penetrate through  
her wall of silence, at last he was  
forced to concede his defeat and

retreat in ignoble clatter, descend  
to the ground via a metal ladder,

his humiliation broadcast to all  
surrounding but his name and face  
and the traces of his disgrace

still undetected in the darkness.

## Galina

In a ramshackle wooden mansion  
with peeling bright green paint and  
plastic sheeting on absent windows

where three shy felines scamper and  
whose premises are divided between  
the artist and a cantankerous sculptor,

she resides alone but self-sufficiently,  
speaks with her daughter once a day  
using the phone strapped around her

neck in a colorful halter, but mostly  
devotes herself to painting pictures  
of rural life and Russia's icons and

traditions, including on door fronts  
and pieces of discarded furniture she  
found lying rife in a rubbish pile and

that now surround her like so many  
family and friends in recompense  
for the life with which she dispensed

when she embarked and departed.

For Ivan Pavluchenko iho  
Of his grandmother, Galina Pisareva

## Now and Then

On a wintry night in congealing  
light, reflections of shimmering  
images of a riverbank's classical

structures, concatenated in their  
impeccable proportions, appear  
so resplendent, able to transcend

any fracturing of eaves that may  
become apparent in the sunshine,  
that they hover without distortion

like the porcelain faces of pastel  
maidens regally ambulating across  
the parquet of a sumptuous palace

from a former, more noble time.

But in our car we cannot speed  
away from what we really are,  
though perhaps it suffices to see

the buildings flicker through  
the filter of window to remind  
us they are no longer granted for

the taking, that when we waken  
in the morn somewhere a house's  
foundations will be quaking while

pulses race with fingers shaking  
when angry currents pound the  
potemkin walls of our making

indifferent to what was sublime.

## Le Divin Enfant

It is not necessary to believe  
as a Christian in order to see  
in the arrival of a newborn a

minor miracle, not only thanks  
to the joy a birth always brings  
to doting parents but because

we come to see the complexity  
of human procreation and know  
that our progeny provide a way

while we still inhabit this earth  
to prolong our lifetimes into a  
future lasting beyond individual

duration, allow us to claim our  
inevitable declension will not  
be in vain so long as the family

line reinvents itself in our train.

## Downpour

The twelve days between Christmas  
in Western lands and Russia, falling  
half in the old year and in the new,

offer as many reasons for reflection  
and resolutions of good intentions  
but for many also spell a time for

dying, when destiny decides to end  
their lives no matter how hard they  
are trying to make it through winter.

Even for the rest of us, surviving  
each day can be a challenge when  
the skies are gray and precipitation

drearily never ceases, mixing with  
grime in a way that reminds us that  
we too are already beyond our prime,

that the fatigue vision feels is a yoke  
on the bleary that we cannot shake  
off until the moment when, released,

our sight need no longer be weary.

## Ravenous

The gray and black raven  
screeches and hops nearer,  
  
less craven than in previous  
years in the warmer weather,  
  
with pickings less slim and  
better able to peck at whim,  
  
not obliged to penetrate ice  
to spear a delectable morsel  
  
for his ever yawning craw.

From time to time he seems  
to heed the caws of brethren  
  
and join them in their maw  
of haranguing and hectoring,  
  
leaving us a little fearful and  
in awe of flocked marauding  
  
that tells us death's wings  
flap incessant while in waiting  
  
for us to falter and finally fall.

## Knights Errant

The sun at last reappeared today  
to brighten up the surroundings

and clear up our personal horizons  
and efface the moats of darkness

dug depressingly under our eyes.

Just as after an extended absence  
it delights to be riding homeward

and glide on railroad's iron ribbons  
toward your cadences and radiance

to claim your clemency as my prize.

## Inside

On sloppy streets disfigured  
by winter they trace heavily  
the track to their destination,

open reinforced steel doors  
lacking even a peep hole to  
the tune of artificial chimes

and coded digital passwords,  
enter into the lobby and pace  
broken dilapidated stairways

of often grimy concatenation  
until they find their apartment,  
walk into the most hospitable

space they schemed imaginable.

So it is when meeting people:  
you must find a way to slide  
past the initial unsmiling stares

and studied uncaring neutrality  
and insinuate yourself behind the  
stoic face of suffering to uncover

inside them a charitable place that

seems so humane and habitable.

## Snowslide

In such a temperate winter  
I'm sometimes shaken awake  
by the crack and crash from

a neighboring roof of a small  
avalanche that spills onto the  
street or an adjacent courtyard.

Afterwards, before I fall back  
to sleep, I can hear the steady  
drips of water calling; while

they're not a Chinese torture,  
I think about how whales and  
porpoises communicate with

their screeches across oceans  
and wonder if anyone or any-  
thing conceivably is listening,

count the pendulum of a clock  
and my own heartbeat talk as  
I contemplate alone the future.

## A Life

It's inconceivable not to feel  
a real affinity for a gentle man  
with white hair and soft eyes

and an ever modest smile who  
started out as a translator by  
dubbing American films into

Russian to make them more  
comprehensible to a then less  
than cosmopolitan audience.

Yet notwithstanding his pacific  
ways he did not waver a second  
before inveighing against the

military Soviet suppression of a  
friendly country though it meant  
several years spent in a prison.

Which is why he easily could be  
redeemed as a civil society legend  
since already his head was clear

about what waited in store and he  
did not fear political repression  
having being demeaned before.

Yet though he survived the camps  
and even the un-named assailants  
who contused his vision, in the end

he could not outlast the aggression  
within, relentless in its elimination.

Even then he died optimistic, his  
shock of mane protruding forward

and with lids unlocked like panes  
forever open to a better future.

In memory of  
Boris Pustyntsev

## Like a Glove

Insects may crack open their  
exoskeletons when their mass  
expands beyond its boundaries

just as snakes and lizards molt  
their coverings periodically so  
in order to bolt into adulthood,

or larvae may wrap themselves  
in cocoons for a moon or two  
before emerging enrapturing

in taking flight as butterflies.

I too have been fortunate in  
you to have a second skin that  
has always tightly gloved me,

always let us begin again by  
expanding and adjusting its  
tone and textures to respond

without fracture under changing  
circumstances, but most of all  
something I could always feel

comfortable in since it became  
so second nature, never lacking  
in warmth and hugging my body

without any prompt or reason  
as our wings grew and blew us

high, soaring over the seasons.

For Vero

## Gagarin

On the bullet train to Moscow  
I watched a film on the life  
of Yuriy Gagarin, the Soviet

cosmonaut and the first man  
to look down at earth from  
the weightlessness of space

while locked into full orbit,  
even if Russia finally lost on  
the clock for a lunar landing.

From a ship's porthole rocking  
on steel rails, I may not scan  
the night for celestial pinpricks

but I can drink in the ocean of  
shafts of white in the forests  
of bending birch-tree saplings

as I wonder at the magnitude  
of the plains before me, find  
harmony in the play of light

and soggy black muddy pools  
and clumps of green where life  
is rooted and buries its anchor,

long to escape from mankind's  
tawdry strife and clear a path to  
the raw edge of the frozen tundra.

## One's History

Like a vintage antique mirror  
whose mercury undercoating  
slowly oxidized and tarnished

and whose spotty surface from  
the beginning was distorted by  
imperfections in its glazing,

recollections no more accurately  
recorded not only fade and can  
not reproduce in true the past,

but when glass shatters its once  
consolidated moments resemble  
shards of saw-toothed jaggedness

the fragmented totality of which  
can no longer be glued together  
into a coherent picture, leaving

others to gingerly pick and sift  
through the scattered pieces and  
risk finger-pricks or slicing off

a bit of thin skin or even piercing  
tissues within as they try in vain  
to reassemble- if only a moment-

the puzzle of a life's construction  
before it crumbles to dust dispersed  
in the gusts of the ever ineluctable.

## Forward

It ennobles often to remember  
the past, but at the same time  
one must not allow it to block

inventive view into the future.

For no matter what the travails  
a city or a country might have

suffered or the purest triumphs  
it may have accrued to buffer  
the losses along the way it had

to endure, the passage of years  
is never suspended and health  
depends on the wealth creation

of a new generation, impatient  
to leave its own contribution to  
a nation's legacy, a task made

easier when not weighed down  
with too much posterity as the  
new seeks to crack the molds

of the told, tried and true when  
it can no longer serve to guide,  
now lacking sufficient boldness.

## In Concert

As she braces her cello never  
grounded, but suspended and  
squeezed tight between knees

much as a mother might toss a  
child aloft only to receive and  
embrace it anew, she appears

melded into the musical score  
true to her core, her beatific  
face adoring without a furrow

or sign of strain, tilted slightly  
to one side, mouth tracing only  
the wisp of an enigmatic smile

as if fixed in a famous painting  
by Da Vinci or Raffaello kept as  
treasures in the Hermitage, less

transformed by her playing than  
transported to some other place,  
gracing an audience with a space

for sensing with wonderment a  
possible universe in harmony as  
she moves resin across string

and coaxes forth, sonorous like  
newborn cries, the vibrant sound  
of sky welling forth from the lie

of her instrument's dark cavity.

## Farewell

In leaving this land behind  
it's onerous for us to hold  
handy what we will miss

the most, and we would be  
chary of drawing up a list  
and still warier of insisting

on a single particular thing  
or another, although the gist  
of our tenure is that we will

remain most wistful about  
the Russian language and  
those whose chatter without

any risk mingles in it easily,  
along with gracious hosts who  
lingered with us a moment

or two and always ensured  
we felt welcomed, deceived  
us at times into believing we

might one day even become  
one of them but in any event  
bequeathing to us memories

that have bonded within us to  
be retained with fondness until  
all longing is gone, beyond us.